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## FICTIONAL CHARACTERS IN A REAL WORLD

Unruly fictionalised encounters in *Borat*, *The Ambassador*, and the Yes Men's media hoaxes

Louise Brix Jacobsen

*This article is a study of the critical potential and ethical implications of encounters between fictionalised characters and unsuspecting real people. Through the case studies of Borat, The Ambassador, and the Yes Men's media hoaxes, I aim to show how the use of fictionality as a performative strategy creates a liminal interaction that possesses a critical force which cannot be created in either classical documentaries or fiction films. The article brings together theories of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy (Walsh 2007; Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh 2015; Gjerlevsen and Nielsen, forthcoming) and theories of unruly documentary activism (Reestorff, 2013; Kara & Reestorff, 2015) to investigate to whom the guise of fictionality refers and to which risks they are exposed. It is argued that the practice of unruly activism can be characterised as a specific type of metamodernist art, and that encounters between fictionalised characters and real people (which I term 'unruly fictionalised encounters') constitute a subgenre which is characterised by the ethically-complex deceit of the unsuspecting real people.*

Fictionality; hoaxing; unruly activism; satire; *Borat*; the Yes Men; *The Ambassador*

### Introduction

In this article, I investigate the critical potential and ethical implications of a specific type of media text which is characterised by a boundary-crossing interaction between the real and the fictional. In Sacha Baron Cohen's film *Borat* (2006), Mads Brügger's documentary *The Ambassador* (2001), and in the Yes Men's activist media hoaxes (e.g. of Shell in the Arctic in 2012 and The Dow Chemical Company in 2003), fictionalised characters interact with unsuspecting real people. I will show that this interaction typically displays various forms of immoral, unsympathetic, and illegal behaviour which become the means to a more general

critique of society and its institutions. I will term these interactions ‘unruly fictionalised encounters’, and I conceive of them as a rhetorical mode or resource which can be used in various forms of media texts on different platforms.

Sacha Baron Cohen, Mads Brügger, and the Yes Men put their reputations – and sometimes their lives and freedom at stake – by using fictionalised characters to infiltrate the environment they wish to expose. Sacha Baron Cohen uses the fictional socially-diverging and extremely embarrassing character of Borat to uncover, for example, homophobic and racist attitudes in the United States; Mads Brügger transforms himself into the diplomat stereotype Monsieur Cortzen to unravel the illegal use of diplomacy for the purpose of smuggling diamonds out of Africa; and the Yes Men pretend to be spokesmen for big companies, such as Shell and Dow, in order to expose these companies’ lack of responsibility for environmental disasters. The critique of the various examples of unsympathetic behaviour and illegal actions that this fictionalisation creates is usually carried out in a caustic satirical tone which not only reveals fishy business, but also ridicules the many individuals who interact with the fictionalised characters and believe they are real. The receiver of the media texts, within which the encounters between the real and the fictional are depicted, is invited to laugh in a painful, disciplining manner (Billig 2005), which marks the exposed behaviour of the filmed subjects as socially unacceptable.

However, these seemingly heroic fictionalisations which are deployed to expose injustice can entail severe risks for innocent real people who are also involved in the interaction between the real and the fictional. The fictionalised characters expose a hidden truth, but the question is whether the transgressive behaviour of the fictionalised characters is also used to force real people into certain behavioural patterns. Other important questions are: is this interaction in fact changing and co-creating the truth it was meant to expose? What will happen to those people in the Central African Republic who were promised jobs at a match factory which was never intended to be established (*The Ambassador*)? Or the people who believed they would finally be financially compensated for Dow’s wrongdoings in India because the Yes Men disingenuously promised such a compensation on behalf of Dow? And consider the driving instructor, the humour expert, or the feminist group who take Borat seriously, only to be humiliated on screen. If these ethical problems are caused by fictional characters, who then is responsible for the consequences of their actions?

The goal of this article is twofold. First, I explore the critical potential of these generically disturbing encounters between real and fictionalised characters. My thesis here is that the use of fictionality as a performative strategy creates a liminal interaction which possesses a critical force that cannot be created in either classical documentaries or fictional films. Second, I investigate the ethical implications of these encounters, and I discuss to whom the guise of fictionality refers, and to which risks they are exposed. In this regard, I will argue that the encounters between the fictionalised characters and unsuspecting real people possess an inherent unruliness which both drives the critical force and also situates the encounters in an ethical dilemma.

To be able to investigate the complexity of this liminal interaction, I will use a compound theoretical framework. The theory of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy (Walsh, 2007, Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, 2015) enables an analysis of the communicational force of ‘the invented’ in various contexts. By addressing fictionality as a rhetorical strategy – as opposed to fiction as a genre – fictionality can be attached to parts of a message or media text, irrespective of the assumed non-fictionality of the entire text (see also Jacobsen, 2015). This is a crucial move when it comes to analysing types of interaction which are partly real and partly fictional, and where the line between the real and the fictional is ambiguous. My analysis is carried out in the same vein as Iversen and Nielsen’s work (2017). In this article, they explore the political implications of the experimental use of fictional discourse and, they argue that (Iversen & Nielsen 2017: 260)

... the inventive uses of invention produce aesthetically and ethically arresting forms, reproducing in the viewer rather than simplifying for the viewer the difficult choices and dilemmas inherent in their politically charged topics.

I am also specifically interested in the ‘ethically arresting’ and the possibilities of fictionality but, in this article, I will connect this explicitly to the encounters of fictionalised characters and real people, and explore these encounters as a rhetorical strategy that can be ethically troubling and potentially dangerous.

The analysis of fictionality as a communication strategy in *Borat*, *The Ambassador* and the Yes Men’s activist media hoaxes will be carried out as examples of a specific type of ‘unruly documentary activism’ (Reestorff, 2013; Kara & Reestorff, 2015). To examine the nature of the unruliness of these encounters, I will bring together the theory of fictionality

with classical theories of humour (Chritchley, 2002) and satire (Schwind, 1988; Bruun, 2012). And, to account for the embarrassing ridiculing and the social consequences of the fictionalised encounters, I will incorporate the work of social psychologist Michael Billig (2005). In an earlier article, I investigated the function of humour in encounters between real people and fictionalised characters (Jacobsen 2017). In this article, I draw on the insights of this publication and use them to further explore the unruliness and the ethical complications that the critical functions of humour bring about.

The study of the critical force and the ethical dilemmas of the fictionalised encounters contribute to the research of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy. Much of the work on fictionality so far has focused on the advantages of fictionality as a communication tool. This article contributes to this field of study by showing that the unruliness caused by the encounter between the real and the fictional can indeed be an advantage, because it uncovers something that would remain hidden if the sender were to stay on the path of virtue. However, pointing out the various ethically founded problems and potentially life-threatening dangers that these encounters can entail also calls for further research into the dangers of fictionality. The analytical focus on the liminal encounters caused by fictionality as a rhetorical strategy contributes to recent developments in the study of experimenting documentary-founded formats and the aesthetic practices in the era of post-postmodernism or metamodernism. I will investigate whether the dangerous ethically questionable liminal position possess a new way of engaging with ‘the real’.

In the following section, I introduce the theory of fictionality and motivate this in relation to the term ‘metamodernism’ and the idea of unruly documentary activism. I will use this theoretical foundation to create three subject categories: the artists/documentarists, the subjects named as villains, and the innocent unsuspecting real people. The categories reflect to whom the fictionalised encounters can be dangerous, and they will serve as a platform for the case studies of *The Ambassador*, *Borat*, and the Yes Men’s Dow Chemical hoax.

### **Fictionality as a communicative strategy**

This analysis is carried out within the framework of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy (Walsh, 2007; Phelan & Walsh, 2015). In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007), Richard Walsh (2007: 1) conceives of ‘fictionality’ as a ‘distinctive rhetorical resource, functioning directly as part of the pragmatics of serious communication’. This conception has been further

developed by Nielsen (2011a) and Jacobsen et al. (2013), who focus on fictionality as a communicational quality which a sender can invoke and which a recipient can ascribe to a given communicative act. In 'Ten Thesis of Fictionality', Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh (2015: 62), address fictionality in the form of 'the intentional use of invented stories and scenarios', and Gjerlevsen and Nielsen (forthcoming) emphasise the role of inventiveness with their definition of fictionality as 'intentionally signaled, communicated invention'. Based on these notions and definitions, I – as stated in earlier works (see Jacobsen, 2015 and Forthcoming a) – adhere to the conception that when a sender invokes fictionality, the receiver is invited to conceive of the communicated, or parts of the communicated, as invented.

One of the key benefits of the conception of fictionality as a rhetorical strategy as opposed to fiction as a genre, is the possibility of attaching fictionality to parts of the communicated message. Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh (2015: 67) argue that 'Global fictions can contain passages of nonfictionality, and global nonfictions can contain passages of fictionality. Thus, nonfictionality can be subordinate to fictive purposes, and fictionality can be subordinate to nonfictive purposes. When fictionality, as well as nonfictionality, can be regarded as a local phenomenon or as a resource attached to certain particulars of a text, we can analyse instances of inventiveness – in, for example, documentaries (such as re-enactments) or instances of recognisable localities or celebrities in otherwise clear-cut fictional media texts – without changing our assumptions about the media text as nonfiction or fiction, respectively (c. Jacobsen, 2015 and forthcoming a). However, this also means that we can move away from rigid fiction/nonfiction distinctions in the analysis of texts which blur the distinction between the factual and the fictional. Attaching fictionality to particular attributes of the text enables a move from classification to functioning. This means that case studies can focus on the communicative force of the invented, asking: 'when, where, why, and how does someone use fictionality in order to achieve what purpose(s) in relation to what audience(s)?' (Nielsen Phelan & Walsh, 2015: 63).

In the three cases analysed in this article, fictionality is used strategically and locally in real-world interactions. Cortzen, Borat, and the Yes Men's fake representatives are all fictionalised characters who move around in the real world – detached from generic works of fiction. If fictional characters can interact with real people, it becomes even more urgent to detach fictionality from generic conceptions and to regard the fictional as something more

than a genre demarcated by texts consisting of fictional worlds. What happens when fictionalised characters are let loose in the real world?

### **Aesthetic practice as critique: Metamodernism and unruly activism**

*Borat*, *The Ambassador*, and the Yes Men's activist media hoaxes can be analysed as part of recent developments in aesthetic practice in general, and more specifically within developments in documentary modes and journalistic practice. In theoretical discussions (within cultural studies, philosophy, and aesthetics) of what comes after postmodernism, terms such as post-postmodernism and metamodernism have been debated (see, for example, Turner, 1995; McLaughlin, 2004; Vermeulen & Akker, 2010). The terms are broad and sometimes used synonymously but, for my purpose here, I will refer to the work of Vermeulen and Akker (2010) to pinpoint some of the characteristics of metamodernism in particular. However, in order to take into account the generic specifics of the cases analysed in this article, I will narrow down the engagement in aesthetic trends to recent developments in documentary modes and focus on 'unruly documentary activism'.

According to Vermeulen and Akker (2010: 2), metamodernism designates a new generation of artists who 'increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstructions, parataxis and pastiche in favour of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth and metaxis.' Artists in this tradition typically express despair about various societal affairs but they also embody a possible way out, a sense of hope, and a longing for meaning. Vermeulen and Akker state that (2010: 6): 'the metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all.' This double bind is typically aesthetically expressed in an oscillation (Vermeulen & Akker 2010: 5) 'between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony'. Thus, metamodernism is situated between the modern and the postmodern. The encounters between fictional characters and unsuspecting real people can be viewed as satirically founded activism that occurs in the wake of this type of artful expression. Irony is a key word in these encounters, but it is irony with a sincere and often activist purpose because it is used to display corruption as well as illegal and unsympathetic behaviour. Because the filmed subjects are unaware of the fictionality of the characters they interact with, they are not able to decode the extreme irony the encounters bring about. This decoding is reserved for the film viewers, causing the filmed subjects to

appear naïve, unsympathetic, and sometimes directly stupid. Despair is expressed via the exposure of corruption but, at the same time, the encounters often insinuate that people should behave differently and that reality should be otherwise. Vermeulen and Akker use the term metamodernism to characterise a broad spectrum of artistic practice ranging from the films of David Lynch to the architecture of Herzog and De Meuron, and the installation art of Olafur Eliasson. In order to further account for the specific way the duality of metamodernism is practiced through the risky encounters between the real and the fictional, I will investigate the works of Mads Brügger, Sacha Baron Cohen, and the Yes Men as unruly activism. I argue that unruly activist texts can be characterised as a form of metamodernist art and that the encounters between fictionalised characters and real people entail a specific form of unruliness which makes them a category of their own. They constitute a metamodernist unruliness through an ethically-problematic deception of the depicted subjects.

In his 1988 documentary, filmmaker Alan Rosenthal (1988: 245) argues that ethical considerations have been overlooked in the documentary milieu. He calls for a documentary ethics where ‘the filmmaker should treat people in films so as to avoid exploiting them and causing them unnecessary suffering’. A new sensibility was needed, and the documentary process should be characterised by a concern for the filmed subjects — and not through the strategic use of the subjects to make a (predetermined) point (cf. 253). This initiated an ethical turn within the documentary field (cf. Dews, 2002 and Bishop, 2012), where documentaries are expected to follow certain ethical codes in collaboration with the filmed subjects. However, *Borat*, *The Ambassador*, and the Yes Men’s activist media hoaxes clearly break with this code of conduct. It can be argued that the filmed subjects are used strategically for a higher cause and that sensibility is sacrificed for this cause. *The Ambassador* has previously been analysed as an example of what Kara and Reestorff call ‘unruly documentary activism’ (cf. Kara & Reestorff, 2015). These types of practices are linked to activism because they serve a political agenda and combine activism and art (hence the term ‘activism’) since they often draw from performance-based practices, and they are unruly because they do not adhere to the requirements of the ethical turn. (Kara & Reestorff, 2015: 2). However, I suggest that *The Ambassador*, *Borat*, and the media hoaxes of the Yes Men can all be characterised as unruly because the documentarists/the hoaxers misbehave by breaking laws and transgressing the codes of correct ethical behaviour. The interaction between the real and the fictional becomes unruly because of the tampering with ethical documentary codes, but it also becomes



activism because activism and art are combined – a political critique is caused by performance-based practices.

The definition of unruly documentary activism implies that unruly activist texts can be unruly in various ways. The documentaries of Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore, for example, are categorised as such because they are satirical and politically motivated (see Kara & Reestorff 2015: 2). ‘Satirical documentaries’, defined by Amber Day (2007: 11) as ‘politically motivated documentary exposés that are created in a comedic, tongue-in-cheek tone’, are often (Kara & Reestorff 2015: 2) ‘indicative’ of ‘unruly documentary activism’. They lack a sensibility for the filmed subjects which are usually exposed in an unsympathetic manner by a ‘self-assured if not narcissistic’ first-person narrator who wants to make a politically-motivated point. Despite the fact that this also holds true for the cases analysed in this article, I will also argue that the unruliness of *The Ambassador*, *Borat*, and the Yes Men’s hoaxes first and foremost stems from the interaction between real people and fictionalised characters. The encounters can be said to be inherently unruly because they always involve a certain degree of deception of the unsuspecting real people who believe that the fictional character is real. This involves ethical complexity per se. A degree of deception of the filmed subjects is often essential to the films which are categorised as unruly documentary activism, but it is not constitutive of the genre. Nor is the use of fictionality as a performative strategy. This means that we can localise a specific type of media text in which unruly fictionalised encounters are the essential component, and where the unruliness stems from a betrayal of the filmed subjects, and sometimes also of the receivers of the media text.

I suggest that the unruly encounters between the real and the fictional can be ethically challenging and even dangerous to at least three groups of people:

1. First of all, the artists themselves, who risk reputations, criminal records, or even their lives to expose injustice.
2. Second, the subjects who are named as villains – i.e. the people and institutions who are exposed for their actions.
3. Third, the innocent unsuspecting real people who can be victims in the achievement of higher purposes.

The three cases analysed below show different implications to these groups – but all implications are connected to the question of whether or not the end justifies the means. The interaction between the real and the fictional can, therefore, be said to be situated in an ethical dilemma: To expose immorality, the artist must also behave immorally. In the following section, I will show how the unruliness of the three examples of encounters is created, and I will discuss the functions and risks of this artistic practice.

### ***The Ambassador***

In *The Ambassador*, the Danish documentarist Mads Brügger travels to the Central African Republic (CAR) as the fictionalised Monsieur Cortzen – a stereotypical diplomat with riding boots and cigarette holder.<sup>1</sup> His cover story is that he will open a match factory to create a workplace for locals from the Bayaka people<sup>2</sup> in the area but, unofficially, his purpose is to disclose how diplomats can travel unhindered in and out of diamond producing areas. Cortzen doesn't just document the fishy business. He himself becomes a fake diamond-smuggling diplomat. He buys his fake credentials from the Dutch dealer Willem Tjissen, and he bribes the government and the mine owners. In other words, he becomes one of the criminals he wishes to expose. Cortzen interacts with criminals and encourages and partakes in criminal actions. He appears racist, and he pays the 'bad guys' lip service in order to make them trust him and to convince them that their illegal and immoral actions can be justified. A very controversial event in the film is a visit to a Bayaka village, where Cortzen attends a party hosted by the minister of civil service. The Bayaka, including the children, have been given huge quantities of alcohol 'to be more cooperative' (see also Reestorff 2013), and thus to give the white colonialist an authentic experience. In order to appear trustworthy to the minister, Cortzen has to approve of this behaviour. He dances with the Bayaka people, and delivers a pro forma speech. After this, he hires an Indian match expert to train the Bayaka people in jobs which he knows will never become a reality.

It is important to note that the real unsuspecting people, villains or not, perceive Cortzen as real. It is the viewers of the film who recognise him as a fictionalised character. In other

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<sup>1</sup> The political implications of fictionality in *The Ambassador* have been investigated by Jacobsen et al. (2013) and Iversen and Nielsen (2017). See also Reestorff's important work on the unruly activist practice of Mads Brügger in *The Ambassador* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> In the documentary the word 'pygmy' is used but, since it can be considered pejorative, I will refer to this group as the Bayaka people in this article, as this is what members of the Aka and Baka tribes call themselves (see Duke 2006 and Markowska-Manista 2017)

words, fictionality is only signalled to the film viewers and is kept secret from the filmed subjects. Cortzen, the diamond dealer, displays behaviour which the receiver knows Mads Brügger, the left-wing journalist, would not approve of. He also directly signals the fictionalisation by initiating his trip to the CAR with the words ‘Here ends my life as a Danish journalist’. Furthermore, the film contains a symbolic dressing scene, where Brügger puts on sock suspenders, braces, cufflinks, and patent leather shoes – along with his replica of the Phantom’s ‘good’ ring and other props – which marks his transformation into a fictionalised character who resembles the stereotype of the white coloniser.

Brügger is not necessarily unethical in his message to the film viewers, because we are let in on his true intentions. Brügger signals fictionality and thereby invites us to decode the Cortzen character as a fictionalisation of Brügger. We can, of course, disapprove of his documentary method, but he is not tricking us into believing that diamond dealing or the opening of a match factory is the main purpose of his trip. This cannot be said about the unsuspecting real people. Brügger is, indeed, trying to trick them into believing in his cover purpose, and this means that what appear as fictionalisations to the film viewers can be described as lies to the depicted film subjects. Through the Cortzen character, Mads Brügger tries to conceal the truth to the depicted subjects but, to the film viewers, he uses the exact same character to unveil a hidden truth.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the encounters between Cortzen and the corrupt system are characterised by an extreme absurdity which often causes a peculiar form of incongruent humour (cf. Critchley 2002). When the completed negotiations with the mine owner Monsieur Gilbert are celebrated, Cortzen opens a bottle of Möet & Chandon champagne and explains that they are now tasting what Hitler tasted right before he died. This remark causes Cortzen’s assistant Paul, who is probably not as loyal to Cortzen as he pretends to be, to tell a distasteful anecdote about Hitler making pillows out of Jewish women’s pubic hair. He ends his story by proclaiming that ‘Hitler was a funny guy’. By uttering absurdities and pretending to approve of certain beliefs, Cortzen incites the real people to engage in similar behaviour. The depicted behaviour appears comically absurd, and the audience probably tends to laugh because of the absurdity of the situation. However, this incongruently founded laughter also marks the

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<sup>3</sup> This is characteristic of Mads Brügger’s documentary method. In *Det røde kapel* (*The Red Chapel* 2006, 2009) he travels to North Korea as part of a theater group which pretends to worship the leader, Kim Jong-il. The true purpose of the trip was to unravel the atrocities of the regime. In *Danes for Bush* (2004), he travels to the US as a pro-Bush campaigner in order to uncover right wing behaviour to which he is unsympathetic. I have named this strategy ‘method-documentary’ (cf. Jacobsen 2012) because Brügger infiltrates the milieu he wishes to expose.

critique of the corrupted system. Anyone in the system can be persuaded into doing anything as long as there's money involved. In a memorable scene, Cortzen goes on a boat on the Bangui River with his assistants from the Bayaka people. He sits at the front of the boat on a plastic chair in his colonial outfit with the resigned looking assistants behind him. Woody Guthrie's idealistic "This Land is Your Land" (1940) is used to ironically comment on the corruption and the exploitation of the Bayaka people. The implied message is that the land is not their land – it is instead exploited from all sides.

*The Ambassador* is an activist-founded political project in which absurd humour is used to display corruption. This means that the film can be characterised as satire because humour is used strategically to critique societal conditions (cf. Schwind 1988). In her study of political satire on Danish television, media scholar Hanne Bruun draws on Lars Ove Larsen's distinction between egalitarian satire and elitist satire. Egalitarian satire is directed upwards in the social system, critiquing powerful subjects and institutions, whereas elitist satire displays the marginalised bottom of the social hierarchy (Bruun 2012: 160-161). In *The Ambassador*, the satire displays the weakest in the system (the Bayaka people). However, the critique is directed against the corrupt government which turns a blind eye to the illegal actions of the local mine owners – who exploit local labour, as well as the natural resources of the land – and the naïve European joyriders. The critique is also directed against diplomacy traders and white people who believe that Africa is an unexplored country populated by naive locals who respect the white colonist and can be economically harnessed. Mads Brügger is risking his life and reputation in an egalitarian founded satire project which discloses the corrupt diplomacy system (supported by the West) where the ecosystem and the poorest people in the country become the true victims.

Despite the praiseworthiness of Brügger's project in terms of its political aim, it is dangerous and ethically problematic. If we turn to the list of the three kinds of danger proposed above, the encounters first of all become dangerous to Brügger, who endangers his life and risks getting a criminal record. Some of the people he interviews disappear and are later found dead, and he is made aware of the dangers of being caught with diamonds in his possession at a time when he doesn't have the right credentials. In general, it is unclear who he can trust (if anyone). Despite his status as a fictionalised character, Cortzen still buys real diamonds and commits actual crimes. And if Cortzen is killed or injured, Brügger's body will pay the price.

The fictionalised encounters are especially ethically challenging when it comes to the Bayaka people who were promised jobs in a match factory which was never intended to be established. Brügger has been criticised for sacrificing the hopes and dreams of innocent people for a higher cause (Reestorff 2013). In this regard, the practice of Mads Brügger is a direct transgression of Rosenthal's documentary ethics. It can be argued that the desired sensibility is missing, and that innocent people are caused 'unnecessary suffering' because of his hidden agenda.

Finally, the encounters are dangerous to those people whom the film names as villains – the diplomacy dealers, the corrupt members of the government, etc. The film raised worldwide awareness of the corruption – and the Liberian government promised to investigate the diplomatic network. However, it remains a question as to whether immoral behaviour is justifiable as long as it is villains who are being exposed. The encounters between the real and the fictionalised uncovers a terrifying hidden truth, but as was mentioned in the introduction, the question is whether or not Cortzen's behaviour is used to force real people into certain behavioural patterns. By creating the scoundrel he wishes to investigate, he is taking several other types of villains with him when he falls. Except that he doesn't fall for real, and he can ascribe the unsympathetic illegal behaviour to a fictional character. This does not change the fact that crimes have been committed and that Brügger has risked his life. However, it leaves us with a fictional culprit who has committed true crimes that other real people must pay for. I will turn to the case of *Borat* before discussing this ethically complex interaction further.

### ***Borat***

In Sacha Baron Cohen's<sup>4</sup> *Borat*, the journalist Borat Sagdiyev from Kazakhstan is sent to the US to make a documentary about American culture. Borat is a fictive character, but he acts in the real world where he subjects real people to socially divergent behaviour. Borat defecates and masturbates on the street, and he insists on kissing and giving handshakes to people in the subway. This behaviour creates humorous cultural crashes – such as encounters with a feminist group and a humour expert – but it also discloses radical standpoints – such as when

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<sup>4</sup> The British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen is known for his various fictive characters who interact with unsuspecting real people. Borat first appeared as a character in Cohens *Da Ali G Show* which was broadcast in 2000. Cohen has since created the fictive characters of Brüno (2009), Admiral General Aladeen (*The Dictator*, 2012), and in 2018 he created the TV show "Who is America?" in which he appears in numerous disguises to lure powerful Americans into exposing their unsympathetic behaviour.

Borat condemns homosexuality and thus prompts a rodeo manager to say that he wants to hang homosexuals.

Some of the people Borat interacts with are a part of the production team and aware that he is fictional but, as emphasised by Lewis MacLeod (2011), we can be sure that those who filed law suits against Baron Cohen were not aware that Borat was a fictional character. Baron Cohen was sued by a driving instructor who was exposed to Borat's sexual advances and his drinking and shouting while driving. He was sued by two etiquette coaches who were exposed to a poop in a bag at the dinner table and a visit from a prostitute. And he was also sued by the fraternity boys from South Carolina who expressed misogynist views and their approval of slavery whilst in his company.

As in the case of *The Ambassador*, *Borat* contains extreme absurdities and the humour is indeed incongruent because it is nurtured by the clashes between the alienated Borat and common social norms. This also means that Borat causes an immense number of embarrassing situations which can be painful to endure for both the filmed subjects and the viewers of the film. This actualises a darker side of humour in which – according to social psychologist Michael Billig – laughter can be painful and socially disciplining. In *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Billig argues that humour is not always linked to positive feelings of joy and relief. To be laughed at is embarrassing and thus, to avoid being laughed at, we tend to follow the given social norms in our culture. This means that ridiculing is a necessary function in the maintenance of social order because laughter becomes a marking of what is right and wrong (Billig 2005: 207): 'In this way, disciplinary humour, in ridiculing those who fail to comply with the codes of appropriateness, stands guard over rules, which are not assumed to be funny'. It is exactly by breaking social rules that Borat provokes laughter founded in embarrassment, which exposes radical and ethically-unacceptable behaviour in American society.

MacLeod states that the viewers of the film are the only ones who are able to decode the humour in *Borat*: 'how funny Borat is depends very much on how real he is'. He is funny to the viewers of the film who see him as a fictional character and completely socially divergent from the filmed subjects because they see him as real. As a viewer of *Borat*, one can wonder why the filmed subjects are unable to detect his fictional status. MacLeod explains this by pointing to Borat's extreme otherness (MacLeod 2011: 120):

Borat's high-volume performance of cultural difference escapes fictional detection because, to the addressees, Kazakhstan functions as an unmarked and open cultural space, a domain almost as remote as fiction.

Borat's avoidance of 'fictional detection' means that he can go far in his transgressing, embarrassing behaviour without his real identity being disclosed. This is how he gets the American fraternity boys and the rodeo manager to confess their radical convictions, how he provokes the feminist group to condemn a non-existing governmental scientist, who according to Borat, claims that 'women's brains are the size of squirrels', and how he gets his extremely hospitable and understanding dinner hosts to finally send him away because he calls the prostitute Lynette and makes her attend the dinner party. In this way, the encounters between the fictionalised character of Borat and the unsuspecting real people he interacts with possess an increased critical potential. At the same time, however, MacLeod suggests, the criticism also ends up pointing to Baron Cohen because his incongruent actions also look like attempts to stigmatise very tolerant people, who otherwise try their best to avoid stigmatising social deviants like Borat.

If we look at the three kinds of danger discussed previously, we can conclude that even though Sacha Baron Cohen risks getting beaten up or arrested, the unsympathetic behaviour of Borat only partly falls back on the actor himself. The character of Borat is a racist and afraid of Jews; the actor Baron Cohen is not – he is in fact Jewish. Moreover, the fact that Borat was interviewed by CNN and Fox News in 2006 after the film was released underlines how Borat (and not Baron Cohen) is sometimes made to answer back to the critical questions.<sup>5</sup> And how does one reasonably argue with a fictional character?

To the people whom the film names as the 'bad guys' (for example the rodeo manager and the fraternity boys), the fictionalised encounters become highly damaging. They thought Borat was real, and that he shared their homophobic and racist stances. Now their radical attitudes are condemned, circulated, and made famous worldwide. To the people who actually just wanted to help Borat, the behaviour becomes ethically questionable. Consider, for example, the etiquette coaches who really make an effort not to stigmatise Borat, only to be humiliated on screen. According to their lawsuit, they were put out of business after their

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough investigation of the controversy between Baron Cohen/Borat and the Kazakhstani government see Saunders 2007 and 2008.

appearance in Borat, because it is rather difficult to work with etiquette when you are associated with poop on a dinner table and visits from prostitutes (cf. MacLeod, 2011: 113)

As in the case of *The Ambassador*, the justification for immoral behaviour can be questioned. When Baron Cohen creates the fictional character of Borat, he lures the subjects depicted into actions he wishes to expose. MacLeod describes Borat as (MacLeod, 2011: 115) ‘a fictional microcosmos unto himself’, and he raises interesting questions regarding Borat’s conversations with real people. MacLeod (2011: 117) says:

If Borat is fictional and Borat forcefully dictates the terms of the conversation, the conversation itself might well be said to take place in context/world of his making (his own possible world), one which isn’t necessarily continuous with everyday life.

Situating the conversation somewhere between the real and the fictional means, and I argue that this is true of *The Ambassador* as well, that the interaction is unfolded in a liminal space, where a fictive bubble around Borat is penetrated – and his fictive behaviour influences the actions of the real people. The real people are partly drawn into this bubble, and if we agree with MacLeod, their behaviour should not be judged as being entirely ‘continuous with everyday life’. However, the reality is that the behaviour of the fraternity boys and the rodeo manager is judged as real behaviour, while Baron Cohen is, in a sense, protected under the guise of fictionality.

Thus, both Mads Brügger and Sacha Baron Cohen put themselves up on a moral pedestal but, at the same time, they behave in ethically-problematic ways during their missions to uncover other people’s moral declines. The exposure of the documentary subjects creates the risk of a miscarriage of justice and a trial by media without juridical procedures.

### **The Yes Men**

The Yes Men is an activist group which uses hoaxing strategies to expose how big corporations and governmental institutions often act in dehumanising ways towards the public. They have created fake websites, e.g. for George Bush and the World Trade Organization. They have impersonated representatives from various corporations (such as the WTO, Dow Chemicals, and Shell) – and they have performed as these fictional characters at prestigious conferences as well as TV-news interviews transmitted worldwide. These performances are what the Yes Men call identity corrections: ‘Impersonating big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them,



and otherwise giving journalists excuses to cover important issues' (theyesmen.org). In the documentary film *The Yes Men Fix the World* (Bichlbaum et al., 2009), they explain how they usually practice their activism 'What we do is pass ourselves off as representatives of big corporations we don't like. We make fake websites then wait for people to accidentally invite us to conferences'. This is also what happened in 2004, when the Yes Men created the Dow Chemical hoax.

In 2004, Andy Bichlbaum from the Yes Men appeared on *BBC World* as Jude Finesterra, a Dow Chemical spokesman. He was invited by the BBC because they found him through the website Dowethics.com, which the BBC failed to recognise was in fact created by the Yes Men. Dow Chemical owns Union Carbide, which is the company responsible for one of the worst chemical disasters in history: the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India.<sup>6</sup> According to the Yes Men, Dow has not taken full responsibility for this – and the Yes Men exploited the 20 year anniversary of the disaster to let a fictive representative of Dow appear on the news to apologise and express Dow's willingness to finally take full responsibility and compensate the victims. He states that Dow plans to clean up their mess, pay for medical care, and research the hazards of Dow products. In the interview, Jude Finesterra mentions the extent of the planned compensation (BBC World 2004): 'We have a 12 billion dollar plan', but his statements also point directly to the wrongdoings of Dow and other companies (BBC World, 2004):

This is the first time in history that a publicly owned company anything near the size of Dow has performed an action that is significantly against its bottom line simply because it's the right thing to do. And our shareholders may take bit of a hit (...) but I think, that if they're anything like me, they will be ecstatic to be part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those that we've wronged.

The fact that this interview is conducted as part of the BBC international news flow seems crucial when it comes to the critical force of the media hoax. Since the BBC is one of the biggest and most highly respected news channels in the world, the news will spread globally and it is most likely that viewers will conceive of the news as being trustworthy: if the BBC reports on something, then it must be globally relevant, and if the BBC believes it, it must be relevant,

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<sup>6</sup> On December 2, 1984, more than 600.000 people in the small towns surrounding the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal were exposed to the highly toxic gas 'methyl isocyanate'. The exposure, which was caused by an accident, lead to an estimated 15.000 deaths, and many of the survivors have struggled with various repercussions, including the birth of mentally and physically disabled children. (See for example Taylor 2014).

important, and true. The interview ends with the BBC host's final cementation of Finesterra's statements as real news (BBC World 2004): 'Dow Chemical now fully accepts responsibility for the events in Bhopal 20 years ago, and they will cooperate in future legal action'.<sup>7</sup>

In her book *Satire and Dissent*, Amber Day demonstrates how the Yes Men can be characterised as exponents of the type of activism she calls 'identity nabbing' (Day, 2011: 146f): 'participants pretend to be people they are not, appear in public as exaggerated caricatures of their opponents, or ambiguously co-opt some of their power'. This phenomenon can furthermore be categorised as being part of the broader activism tendency of 'culture jamming' (Day, 2011: 148): 'the practice of using forms of mass culture against itself through tactics like parody and irony'. Day analyses various forms of activism in which irony is used as a tool in activism with the purpose of inciting political change. Taking the Yes Men as one of her examples, she shows the critical potential of making the viewers and the news channel unable to detect the irony in the first place. When the Yes Men transforms into their opponents, she argues (2011:171), it is an attempt to 'influence the direction of public discourse'. The Yes Men can direct the critique against specific opponents, as well as against the surroundings which accept the actions of these opponents. In this context, Day states the following (2011: 149):

They combine the identity nab with invisible theater (as developed by Augusto Boal), rendering the faux identity they have assumed much more difficult to immediately recognize as fake, working to engage and perhaps enrage their audiences, and, ideally, spurring viewers to question their believable but morally suspect replications of corporate, neo-liberal philosophy.

The effect of the interaction between the fictive Finesterra and the unsuspecting news host is that Dow was subsequently forced to go public and deny all of the proposed goodwill. When the organisation had to take back all the support the Yes Men had offered on their behalf, they exposed themselves and the unacceptable behaviour that very powerful corporations can get away with. This is a form of 'shaming'-strategy (Day, 2011: 154), where Dow, despite their attempt to save face, cannot escape condemnation. In this way, the Yes Men possess a catalyst effect: they perform an action which forces Dow to perform a counter action, which becomes the actual critique of the company. In this way, the Yes Men use fictionality to reveal hidden

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the Yes Men's media hoaxes in relation to satirical fake news, see Jacobsen Forthcoming b.

agendas and to display how things could have been – or as they say themselves (Bichlbaum et al., 2009): “It is an honest representation of what Dow should be doing”

When it comes to the use of fictionality, the Yes Men’s strategy differs from those of Mads Brügger and Sacha Baron Cohen. The Yes Men not only rely on the deception of the subjects involved, they also rely on the initial deception of the viewers. This means that the practice of the Yes Men functions as a specific type of hoax. For my purpose here, I will refer to hoaxes as “humorous or malicious deception” (Oxford Living Dictionaries) and, following film scholars Hight and Roscoe, I conceive of hoaxes as deceptions which are planned and meant to be revealed. According to Hight and Roscoe (2001, 72), hoaxes ‘trigger reflexive interpretations among viewers because of the subsequent uncovering of their fictional status’. In her article “On Hoaxes, Humbug and Fictional Portraiture”, Joanna Scott also points to the initial deception and the reflexive potential it brings about (2016, 28):

Hoaxes gain credibility when they are reported by reputable sources and verified by experts. Good hoaxes are memorable because they are effectively convincing. The best hoaxes, though, are more than mere tricks. Like any artful performance, they give us a chance to reflect on our willingness to be deceived.

Thus, the reflexive and hence critical potential of the hoax lies in the exact moment the receiver realises that she or he has been deceived. This means, that in order to carry through with the critique, the signalling of fictionality must happen subsequently and contextually, and the viewer must ascribe fictionality to the message retrospectively. As was the case with *The Ambassador* and *Borat*, the societal critique is humour generated and created in the encounter between real organisations (Dow and the BBC) and a fictive character (Finesterra). However, what distinguishes the Yes Men’s art practice in this regard is the connection between laughter and critical potential triggered by the disclosure of the news as a hoax. When we realise that what we thought was real news was actually a hoax, it can cause the laughter of realisation which underlines the societal critique generated by the fictional. As in the case of *The Ambassador* and *Borat*, it is definitely not funny to the filmed subjects who come across as unsympathetic or ignorant. Rather, the joke is directly on them and implicitly on us as consumers because we believed the news in the first place.

If we turn to the dangers, the critique is not only carried out at the expense of Dow (whose share price went down along with their reputation) – but also of the BBC, the news

host, and the viewers who engaged with the news as if it were real. To the BBC, the hoax created a credibility crisis, where they had no choice but to break the news of the hoaxing of their own channel, causing them to underline the importance of accuracy of journalism (see also Graff 2004). The Yes Men's practice is a cunning way of criticising not only corrupt organisations, but also a lack of being critical of sources and naive consumption processes: will we believe anything as long as it presented to us in the right context? Even though the Yes Men also used fictionalised characters to force Dow into performing unsympathetic actions, it does not seem as ethically questionable as the behaviour of Borat and Brügger: who would disagree with the human gesture of compensating the victims of this disaster? What seems highly problematic though, are the consequences for the people in India who, for a day or so, actually believed that they would finally be compensated for Dow's wrongdoings. In the documentary *The Yes Men Fix the World*, we see how the Yes Men were confronted with this ethical problem in a news interview. Suffering from moral qualms, they travel to Bhopal to investigate how the citizens reacted. Even though they are met with understanding and an overall appreciation for the renewed attention to the atrocities of the disaster, it is also clear that many people believed the good news and that they cried tears of joy when they thought they would finally be compensated. The practice of the Yes Men is indeed unruly. Through the tricking of the filmed subjects (the news host), the rest of the news production team, the viewers of the BBC World, and of Dow Chemicals, they are able to point their critique in several directions. However, the tricking also has more or less justifiable consequences for people acting in good faith (the BBC team) and for the suffering people in India.

### **Findings and conclusions**

The case studies of *The Ambassador*, *Borat*, and the Yes Men's Dow Chemical media hoax have shown that the encounters between fictionalised characters and unsuspecting real people can be used to critically target various atrocities in society. By infiltrating the milieu they wish to expose, Mads Brügger, Sacha Baron Cohen, and the Yes Men can access an otherwise inaccessible truth, and thereby disclose governmental corruption, unsympathetic social behaviour, and the dangers of media power and consumption processes. The encounters often create an absurd incongruence which causes a socially-disciplining laughter which marks the behaviour as socially unacceptable and thereby cements the critique. Irony is definitely not

dead in the age of metamodernism, but it is used politically to display immoralities and corruption in society.

The analysis has shown that the cases studied can be characterised as a specific form of unruly activism in which the unruliness stems from encounters between the real and the fictionalised. The encounters are staged to create a form of politically-motivated deception of the filmed subjects. The unruly fictionalised encounters renders the media texts in which they are used as a rhetorical strategy into a form of metamodernist art which engages in the real through the means of fictionalisation. Exposing corruption is an expression of despair, but the underlining of what *should not have been* is also a way of suggesting what *should have been* instead – or in the words of the Yes Men – what the corrupted ‘should be doing’ (Bichlbaum et al., 2009). Exposing immoralities is a way of implicitly suggesting an alternative to the political reality.

The analysis has established that the fictionalised encounters become ethically questionable and potentially dangerous to at least three subject groups: 1) the artists themselves, 2) the subjects or institutions the artists are criticising, and 3) to a group of innocent people (or the true victims of unruly encounters.) The artists can, to a certain extent, be protected by fictionalisation because the problematic behaviour is linked to the fictive character, but the real people involved in the interaction are judged one to one for the types of behaviour that these encounters induce. The fictional characters can go to places the actors cannot go as themselves, but the behaviour of the unsuspecting real people is still conceived of as real. Thus, encounters between the real and the fictional possess a tremendous critical force that can display problems in society that would be otherwise inaccessible to traditional journalistic practices. The diplomat dealers in *The Ambassador* would never reveal their business if they knew that Monsieur Cortzen was really a journalist trying to expose their illegal business. In fact, they try everything to avoid being recorded or filmed. According to MacLeod (2011), the fraternity boys, the humour expert, and the etiquette coaches in *Borat* claim that they participated in the Borat project under false pretences. They thought it was a documentary and that Borat was a Kazakh journalist. The fraternity boys also claim that they were promised that the film would never be screened in North America (MacLeod 2011: 113). Such revelations indicate that it is the unruly fictionalised encounter that leads to the exposure of the unsympathetic behaviour, and that the fraternity boys would not have participated if they knew that Borat was actually played by an actor who was deliberately provoking them to

expose their misogyny and approval of slavery. As shown in the case study of the Yes Men's news hoax, the most damaging critique arose when Dow was forced to deny the proposed goodwill and reveal that they did not intend to do what the Yes Men promised on their behalf. Without the unruly encounter between a fictionalised character (the Dow representative played by Bichlbaum) and the unsuspecting real people (the BBC journalists and the consumers), the hoax would not have been real breaking news and the forced denial of goodwill would not have taken place.

This critical force is important, and the use of it in the three cases is morally admirable. However, the case studies also show that the encounters come with a price. When fictionality is used as a form of documentary or journalistic strategy, we can learn truths about our world that we cannot learn from traditional documentaries or news sites. However, the truth that is revealed is often co-created by the documentarists, making it a version of the truth that would fail the journalistic truth criteria. In many ways, it is heroic activism, but it must also make us reflect upon our (cf. Scott 2016: 28) "willingness to be deceived".

As I have shown on the basis of such fusions between the real and the fictional, future work on fictionality as a communicative strategy must take into account the fact that fictionalisation can be ethically disturbing. It is not the act of fictionalisation in itself that is challenging – it is when it is practiced in certain contexts. The case studies have shown that the interaction between fictionalised characters and unsuspecting real people is biased towards the unruly because it always involves deception, and because innocent people in some way or another seem to suffer for a higher cause. When it comes to the deceit of innocent people, the encounters become extremely ethically troubling, but the question remains whether or not the artists' misbehaviour can be excused as long as the atrocities exposed are bad enough. Therefore, the encounters are situated in an ethical dilemma: to expose dangers you must be dangerous yourself.

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